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CRS Issue Statement on Europe and the EU

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Common values, overlapping interests, and shared goals are the foundation of what is regularly described as the transatlantic partnership between the United States and Europe. Although Americans and Europeans do not always agree on every aspect of every issue, the two sides are often one another's partner of choice, if not necessity, in facing an array of major global challenges. The United States and Europe are cooperating, or seeking to deepen their cooperation, in addressing political and security concerns that include terrorism; conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan; Iran's nuclear ambitions; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the future of the Balkans and countries of the former Soviet Union; relations with Russia; climate change; and energy security. Observers assert that neither side can adequately address such an agenda alone, and that the track record shows the two sides are better off when they work together.

The economic relationship is also an important pillar of the transatlantic partnership. The United States and Europe have the world's largest trade and investment relationship, and transatlantic cooperation has been key in liberalizing the world trading system. The two sides are continuing efforts to reduce remaining non-tariff and regulatory barriers to transatlantic trade and investment. While much of the economic relationship is harmonious and mutually beneficial, some tensions exist. The global financial crisis has tested the relationship, and the two sides have not always agreed on the best way to stimulate economic recovery or to prevent future crises. Both sides have sought completion of the Doha round of trade negotiations, but have been unable to come to an agreement with one another on agricultural subsidies. Transatlantic trade disputes also persist over poultry, aircraft subsidies, hormone-treated beef, and bio-engineered food products.

The U.S. Congress and successive U.S. Administrations have supported European efforts at political and economic integration as a way to foster a stable and prosperous Europe. The European Union (EU) now consists of 27 member countries. On an extensive range of issue areas, members' decision- and policy-making takes place at the level of the EU institutions, making the EU an increasingly important interlocutor for the United States. At the same time, many observers and U.S. officials also point to the value of maintaining strong bilateral relations with the individual member states of the EU. While supporting the EU's evolution, U.S. policymakers have at times grappled with how to manage relations with an enlarged EU that seeks a more prominent role on the world stage—often in partnership with United States and its goals, but not always with the same set of priorities or perspectives.

The EU and some of its member states may undergo political and institutional changes in 2010 that could impact transatlantic relations. Implementation of the EU's new reform treaty—the Lisbon Treaty, which came into effect on December 1, 2009—will be worked out during the year. Among other goals, the Lisbon Treaty seeks to develop a more robust and coherent EU foreign policy and to encourage the development of EU defense capabilities. The treaty also enhances the powers of the European Parliament (EP), whose members were elected to a new five-year term in June 2009. A new European Commission was appointed in fall 2009, and awaits confirmation by the EP in early 2010. The United Kingdom is expected to hold a national election by June 2010, and France and Germany are scheduled to have important regional elections this year.

The 111th Congress is likely to take an ongoing interest in a number of the aforementioned U.S.-European foreign policy and economic issues. Transatlantic responses to the global financial crisis, climate change, and economic regulation could be issues on the Congressional agenda. The EU's role in foreign policy could also be examined in the context of U.S. policies on Afghanistan, Iran, the Middle East, Russia, counterterrorism, and energy security. Additional issues facing the 111th Congress could center on the structure of transatlantic relations, including topics such as EU-NATO relations and the effectiveness of current Euro-Atlantic security institutions.

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